

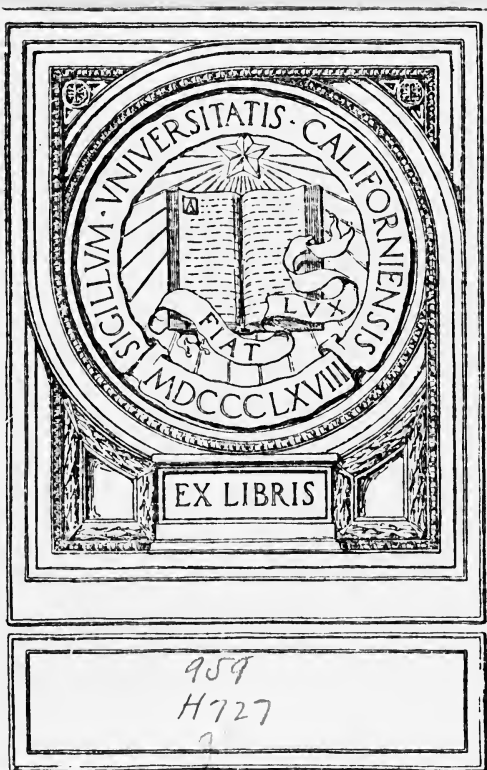
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GRANITE
AND
ALABASTER

RAYMOND
HOLDEN



GRANITE AND ALABASTER

AMERICAN



THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
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TORONTO

GRANITE *and* ALABASTER

BY
RAYMOND HOLDEN

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TO MY WIFE

625329

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GRANITE AND ALABASTER

ONCE

Once there was silt and gravel everywhere
And water running in great roaring floods—
No feet on earth nor wings upon the air
Nor any green that could have promised buds.
There was a vast ice precipice withdrawing
Slower than snails to a glittering cold rest
About the uncertain pole while waters gnawing
At rigid rock made room for root and nest.
Then some ancestral cell now lodged in me
Went writhing gaily under the glacier tongue
Pastured upon a wild uncertainty.
Now there are men. Life is no longer young.
Now there is warm flesh and warm vocal breath.
The only glacier is the shadow of death.

SUGARING

I

A man may think wild things under the night
In March when there is a tapping within pails
Hung breast-high on the maples. Then the stars,
Washed by a wind that all day long
Lay in the sunny pastures of the thaw,
Shine like what eyes would be if men were gods.
Then the trees seem like rootlets sprung from earth
Into the fertile mold of the black air.
A man may think wild things under the stars
In March when gusty ground-winds stretch their veils
Across deep footprints in the hillside snow.
He may believe that life is beautiful
And will outlast all Autumns and all Winters.
He may believe that his warm body is one
With rock and root and iron-fingered frost
And that its happy power is like the sap
The subject of inevitable rise
Timed by sure seasons, promised to the skies.

II

Look! The mountain shoulders a weight of moon
Come from the many million miles of night
To move among these vapors which go up
And wind among the winds. The brown sap works
Its foamy bulk over a great log fire.
Colors of flame light up a man who kneels
With sticks upon his arm and in his face
A grimace of resistance to the glow.
The very world is burning, though it be March,
With a wild flame which stirs the life of trees
Here in the vat and the blood in a man's heart.
Out there among the roots thaw-runnels make
The only music heard above the sway
Of branches fingering the falling silver.
The fierce flames roar and the embers settle down
Slowly into that darkness which sends a man
Up and away to sleep a tired sleep
And dream of dripping from a rotting roof
Back into sap that once was rid of him.

III

Close the iron doors and let the fire die
And the faint night-wind blow through the broken walls.
The sugar thickens and the moon is gone
And frost threads up the singing rivulets.
I am going up the mountain toward the stars

But I should like to lie near earth to-night,
Earth that has borne the furious grip of Winter
And given a kind of birth to beauty at last.
Earth! The old breath thrills through her once again
And there will be passion soon, shaking her veins
And driving her spirit upward till the buds
Burst overhead and swallows find the eaves
Of the sugar-house untroubled by the talk
Of men gone off with teams to mend the roads.
I think I shall throw myself down here in the snow
So to be very near her when she stirs—
Near to the throbbing of this body of hers.

THE SUMMIT

Here where a man seems in the grip of hands
Which reach up out of the indistinct below
As if to drag him from the place he stands
Into a blue gulf where the tree-tops flow
And straighten and ebb the weathered peak is worn,
As if from too much cleaving of the sky,
To a crumbling blade whose temper storms have borne
Down to give breadth to meadows where cows lie.
So the interminable change goes on
Always among the most established things.
The vast snow pinnacles which were here are gone
Beyond the reach of even eyes or wings
And man stands on the ridges which remain
Feeling the earth dissolving in its rain.

LOST WATER

It is a doubtful noon under these trees,
And I am digging in the stony sand
Among the roots of what a little since
Were blue and yellow flags and now are pods.
Deeper and deeper, and the depth is cool
And forest sounds are soft as a man's breath.
Old pines have done old apple trees to death
And stiffening silence is upon them now.
The sun and I are looking for the sweet
Quiet waters of the rocky veins of earth
In leaf and root and where mold-bitten staves
Remember lips that drank of cups now broken
And the time when buttercups were mirrored here
Where now there is a masonry of crusted leaves.
It is a doubtful noon under the pines
That press their fingered tops to the low sky,
A doubtful noon, a doubtful world, and I . . .

SNOW RAIN

I am not one to mind the rain when it comes
Fingering the sinking snow and leaving prints
Of passage heard to tell from the touch of grass
Bent by a rabbit's frenzy or the wind.
Days like to-day there is something very near
Always upon the point of breaking through.
Men of the mountain towns in the milk-train
Quickened the air with tales of leaping deer
And myths of caribou gone fifty years
Come back to visions straining beyond sight.
Something of me goes out into their talk
For I have lain upon the quiet snow
Watching for flying feet and listening
For the murmuring trees to burst with sudden wings,
And I have felt the drops, as they fall now
Come down almost in passion for a world
Made beautiful by the presence of glad men.
Even now I think there is something very close
Ready to sweep like rainfall over me,—
These men, the lingering patterns of the snow,
The wet that alters them, the purple river,
I climb upon these things almost to touch
The beauty of that power I almost know.

BORERS

The red-nosed grubs that burrow under bark
Of pines too old to earn their daily sunlight
Have come from some place which is very dark
In the imaginings beyond my eyes.
I hear them munching in their paradise
Of many cells steeped in still-running sap.
I lie half-dozing in the patchy sunlight
And if it were not for ants I should have a nap.

But I do not care to think the world is dying
Slow death from mouth to mouth of things that creep
Or spread where lack of sun means never drying
For I am not really sure that now and then
Some sudden glance of some one among men
Could fail to find me sullied, no, not sure,—
Not sure enough to lose the ants and sleep.
There are only times when earth and I are pure.

BURYING GROUND

There is nothing here but the elms for me to speak to
And so I say, Why do you draw yourselves
Upward away from these poor planted people
Who would be forgotten but for their stones?
Small need I have to ask that of the elms
For I myself am only passing by
With the dust and the wind and the seeds of pines,
Knowing that there is no stone waiting here
For me to come and burrow under it,
No stone to mark me different from the elms
That give the earth to the sky.

WINTER

Drowsily, dreamily, the brown boughs
Mingle and murmur in the breeze
And the little animals drowse
And I wonder they do not freeze,
For nothing moves but is shrill
With the Winter's clinking song
And the snow lies deep and the hill
Gleams where the gusts are strong.
I have come down from the house
Which rests on the reaching snow
To the music of murmuring boughs
In the footless world I know,
And to me the cold is a voice
From earth that would speak to me
And urge me not to rejoice
That I am not beast nor tree;
And to me the warmth of my blood
Is an answer saying, "I hear,"
And so we are understood
And so we have nothing to fear
Though I am a man who dies
And the earth is like dust in the skies.

THE PLOW

I

I thought the white patch on the Eastern hill
Was surely snow. I watched it and it stirred,
And even the drifted uplands lost the chill
They had been blowing downward and a bird
Flashed blue and there were others which I heard.

II

The patch of snow moved with a man behind it
And furrows on the hillside rippled brown.
The Winter went like water from my mind
And the misty April sun came faintly down
And I forgot the road which leads to town.

III

I was not anything but one desire
To follow in the wake of the billowy blade
With wind and water and my kind of fire—
To cleave the fallow hillside and invade
Young earth and rise up glad and unafraid.

MOUNTAIN

Over the yellow tops of tamaracks
The dusk floats. Up the valley wild ducks fly
With light from the gone sun upon their backs.

Across the torrent, cloaked in purple sky,
Endowed with the sure silence a man lacks,
A mountain rises, grave and great and high.

Oh, Mountain! Island in a sea of change!
What starry vault of the cathedral air
Can house the murmurs of those prayers which range

Up from my blood toward you, who triumph there
Over the powers which have kept man strange
To what earth, fire, and wind and water share?

Sea-currents shifted sands and you were piled
Above the unbroken shimmer of the sea
And taking power and person from the wild

Warm sun, you shook your rocky shoulders free
And the waters fell and tempests came and filed
Your great shape to this glory which I see.

But I, the foundling fire upon your slope,
Remember nothing of my lineage.
I have been taught by wandering troops of hope

And I know nothing. Snow-berry and saxifrage
Rest tired roots in your heart but my roots grope
At earth and sun and rain and wind that rage

And find them all inapprehensible.
Oh, take me up to your dusk-vaulted walls
Or fall and silence this loud steeple-bell

Of shadow-vaulted flesh, this bronze that calls
To the unguided, unremembering swell
Of a lost air through which a lost star falls!

GHOSTLY RETROSPECT

Through spruces lightened by a flash of birch
Foot over foot soft toe-pads patter down.
Grim little beasts go silently in search
Of birds whose odors linger though they have flown.
Even the sun is stealthy as it falls
Down through the darkness and the wind seems full
Of spectral breaths from the kind of life which calls
To the hungry mouse and the towering horned bull.
I walk on stones in the shadow of steel and glass
But I remember earth as it once was,
So that the look of men and girls that pass
These eyes which feed what senses a man has
Is animately strange, as if it were sight
Of sleek beasts slinking through a jungle night.

TO THE NORTH WIND

I

No wash of the twelve-silvered earth's long flight,
No frosty fury warring with sun gold
Brings you to blow from the black-breasted night
Wind of the North! Tide of this sea of birch!
You are the rich, uncoveted delight
Given to those mad men who madly hold
Close to their hearts throughout their short-houred search
That faithful fire which keeps them from the cold
Of meshy lanes through which the planets lurch.

II

By night, when the inevitable shade
Climbs from our roofs up cloud-stairs zenithward
And hangs in heavy sweeps from blade to blade
Of many-sworded stars, with you at heart
I wander from the waterside parade
Through a silence of small alleys, window-starred.
The cobbles speak to me, lamp fingers part
Shadows like veils. I whom my reasons guard
From swift surprise look up toward you and start.

III

Drawn by your presence flowing in the air,
Urged by the ancient mission of my veins
I enter the last door. A radiance there
Bright as the loveliest planet of the seven
Disarms the sad mask of the sense I wear,
Leaps from the stillness of the place and strains
My body to its beauty. A glad heaven
Dawns in the dusk, dispels the mind's black pains
And fills me with more fire than fills suns even.

IV

Then the auroral prominences fade,
Lifting their roots from out my burning breast,
Folding their flames that seared the senseless shade
Behind my eyes. Then I arise and go.
Far overhead the planet undismayed
Swims with slow splendor toward its heavenly West.
I from the happy regions where you blow
Fall downward, desolate and dispossessed,
Into those ways which there are none below.

V

Lean downward from your station in the sky,
Beloved Beauty! Sweet Crepuscular
Young Goddess of the silver-passioned eye!
Lean down and touch me, take me if you will!

I am a wanderer, a strange passer-by.
You with your young-mouthed laughter want a star.
I am a wanderer gathering coals to fill
A dead star-body. I have wandered far.
Here is my orbit ended, on this hill.

VI

Forgive me the futility of hands,
Forgive me the lit fires that have gone cold,
Forgive me this frail skeleton that stands
Against the sky, the shadows it keeps making!
You who are regent of what man commands
When beauty's torture drives him to be bold,
Forgive him the brief loves his life keeps taking
To save the want of you from growing old!
Forgive his senseless tears and his soul's aching!

SPRING BUILDING

I

At noon the sound of hammering dies and wind
Scatters loose shingles from the untended gable.
The carpenter at the door-frame, grizzle-skinned
And gaunt, spits brown as far as he is able.
He steps across the mud upon a stone
Where, with an elbow and an arm at rest,
He sits, half quiet. He is not alone.
I watch him as he leans against the West.

II

Not from the carpenter, but from the things
Men never know of men I look away,
And where I look a massive mountain flings
Dark rocky fingers tipped with rosy gray
Up through its snowy mantle at a sky
Steeled to a perfect temper of keen blue.
The breath of a thin wind blows faintly by,
More warm, more lovely now than hitherto.
Not so much at the peak as at the things
I know of it I look through the noon ease,

Made wistful by near songs and nearer wings
 And runnels of singing water and sighs from trees.
 Not sharply, but through distances and veils
 I wonder at what earth's elements arrange;
 The rock, the tree, the flesh and blood that fails.
 I wonder where in this evolving change
 I stand that life burns so in breast and limb.
 I wonder, and in the wake of wonder fear
 Comes with its rapture to that mind, grown dim
 With safety which so blindly led me here. . . .
 Here where the forest waits its time for falling
 And mountains feed their power to little streams
 And after dark the hungry beasts go calling
 And last year's leaves lie rotting in sun-beams.

III

Now I stretch out my arms in ravishment,
 Or would but for the near-by carpenter,
 Toward that old mountain in devout dissent
 From too much human triumph, too much stir
 Of the absurd infinitesimal
 Before my eyes. I stretch out eager arms
 At least in spirit, and the great ice-fall
 Which once lay thick above these valley farms
 Seems like a living thing, and the vast sea
 Whose silty shifting piled these pinnacles
 Heaves once again in deep tides over me
 Sweeping strange pain with passionate old swells

Up from my heart to islands in my eyes.
Now I submit to what I almost know
And laugh in hope of being so made wise
Because I too survived that long ago
Gestation and am now a man who hires
Others to raise my walls and lay my sills
And bring me food and scuttle out my fires
Under the watchful silence of these hills.

NIGHT ABOVE THE TREE LINE

I

You berries that are full of the dark dusks
Of mountains and the moisture of chill dews,
Swell on your stems and break your ripened husks
For lips which it would wither you to lose—
If there are lips to what is wandering here
Feeling you underfoot in the rocky night,
Moving about like wind, blowing you clear
Of mists, hanging your leaves with drops of light.

II

Listen! There is a sound of water falling
Down the dark shafted night into the trees.
Wild birds that should be quiet now are calling.
How shall I sleep to-night, troubled with these?
The cool wind through the moon's invisible strings
Blows like a striking of clear silver bars;
The great black peak shudders and leaps and swings
And I am blinded by the fall of stars.

III

I cannot rest. I cannot quiet my limbs.
A sense of climbing keeps my body burning
And the white flame sweeps over me and dims
All that inclines within me toward returning.
Did I see only earth once long ago
And only flesh in faces turned to me?
Sleep? Rest? With my senses shaken so
And the world's valleys lost so dizzily?

IV

Why have I come so near the fearful stars
When what is in me is so much a want
Of utter dark too thick for any wars
Of flesh and spirit dazzlingly to haunt?
I do not know. I do not want to know;
Only to make a fire of weariness
And fling myself upon it and burn and go
Thinly, like smoke, to wind-walled quietness.

FIREWOOD

The glittering crescent of my blade
Is stuck with juices of the tree:
There is the wound which I have made,
There are the dark boughs over me.
I swing the axe. The cones are shaken
And the shuddering tree begins to come
With ripping shrieks which might awaken
The gorged fox in his hidden home.
My blood is brightened and my eyes
Are blurred with flashes of a fire
That leaps like wind and only dies
When I have cut what I require.
The fresh chips falling in the snow
Have something for the sunny wind
Which rose a little while ago
In the old spruce forest I have thinned,
And I whose cheeks can feel it blow
Rest aching hands upon my axe
And have a desperate wish to know
What kind of flame my chimney lacks . . .
Why covet skeletons for food
To keep a man from stiffening
With cold not made to chill the blood
Of fox's foot or bird's wing.

PROSPECT

The eagle hangs so close I see a stir
Of ragged feathers fronting the strong wind
And in the blue beyond where my limbs were
This very morning, colors strangely thinned
With downward distance which are intervals
Full of green stands of grass and pastures cropped
By much diminished cattle, threads of walls
And shiny runs of streams that seem to have stopped.
Only the steady eagle is above me
Hanging in the wind that goes blowing by.
It is as if the earth were trying to shove me
Like a finger upward into the tall sky.
And I could be the finger but for a strange
Disturbing taciturnity in the mass
Of living forest, a silence in the change
Of light across it where cloud shadows pass
Which seems to mean, What can a man point out,
A man whose blood is watered so with doubt?

MOOD

Some things make issue of the loveliest hours
And mar the lightest leisure. These are dead.
White wings of evening fold among the flowers
And winds attach me to them. I am led
Up where the birches shake in the sun's glow
And hemlocks watch their wavy shadows grow.

I am forgotten. The lit solitude
Effaces all my lineaments and name.
Life is among my limbs, and where I stood
Stands an unbodied rapture gone to flame.
Some things make issue of attained desire.
I do not know nor heed them. I am fire.

PROMONTORY

I

On rocky islands half at sea
The derelict waters in a windy glare
Crash and are broken and drip dazzlingly.
The green kelp swirls like drowning hair
Lifting and falling with the tide.
The surf has a motion which shadows ride
As tree-boughs ride the air.
Shadows of cliff and shadows of cloud
Rise and fall with the sea
And wild winds heavy and loud
Clutch downward fearfully.
Against the earth a loom of waves and a whirr
Of sea-fowl banked like mist.
Against the sky a streaming stir
Of earth-blown clouds that belly and twist.

II

Man with his basket hunting nests
Moves through the high-tide spray
And the gulls with their stone-gray breasts
Flutter and glide away

And the crossing shadows of their wings
Melt in the gullies and the moss.
What is it that in a man's heart sings
When the shadows cross?
When overhead the many million cries
Break loose from blood and bone
And the sea seethes toward the skies
And the crevice flowers are blown?
Man with his basket, hunting eggs,
Goes clambering with hands and legs
Over the rocks by the shore
In search of food, in want of more.

III

On rocky islands half at sea
The derelict waters rise and fall
Close fettered to their flow and never free
And the great sea of air from which birds call
Struggles within the limits of the wind
And the great world of stone and sand
And brown earth blown and thinned
Clings to its globe with many a rocky hand,
And birds of blowing wind invade
Dark waters, swift as falling stars,
For fish that swarm the weedy bars
Wide-eyed and afraid.
Men with their baskets hunting nests
Move through the high tide spray

Taking the wind and the mist to their breasts,
Frightening birds away.

IV

What is it that in a man's heart sings
When, with the thundering sea in his ears
And the breath of the great sky shrieking of fears
And the sharp earth bruising his feet, he brings
His basket over the cliffs and home
To mouths too sure that he will come?
Man the hunter of birds and beasts
That in their hunger hunt their kind
And crouch in their rock-homes over feasts—
A man's heart sings, but what of his mind?
How shall he know what it means to be
Master of wing and master of sea?
How shall he know, who has better than claws
To tear red flesh for hungry maws
Why he walks erect while the fox runs low?
Why he remains when the sea-birds go?
How shall he know why life goes around
Its circle above and underground
Through sea and sky, in flood and gale
Through feather and foot and fin and tail?
How shall he know man's destiny?
What shall he think himself to be?
How shall he walk by the strength of the sea
And hide his withered certainty?

THE PASSENGER PIGEON

The dead and gone are not so ancient now
That there is no fluttering of their wild wings heard.
Still living travelers still remember how
They darkened long days' journeys when they stirred
By millions from woods broken by their wings
And how the beat and bustle of their quests
Shut out the sound of all earth's other things
And the ground was soft with feathers from their breasts.
Now they are gone, even to the last lone pair,
And men who never knew them go their ways
With equal clamor and an equal air
Of riding in the saddle of docile days.
This that is like a street is like a wood
Broken by famished wings grown fierce for food.

FISHING

Down the white water and the dark pool
Over the rocks the wind blows and the songs
Of birds with only half-discovered names
Wait for the wind in places which are cool.
How should I know whether the earth belongs
To me or I to earth when all the claims
We have on one another are blown away
And masks fall from the faces of all things
Strangely and suddenly and the light of day
Climbs back to heaven in cloud-stepped clamberings?
I have come for a man's reason with hook and line
To trouble the swift water under the stones
Where wise trout flash their darkness, but as the wind
Blows warm through bodies of great trees, through mine
A passion blows, burning my very bones
And making flame of the dust that is in my mind.
This then, instead of fishing, is an hour
Of being one with earth, as if her quiet
Had taken the shape for which a young life aches
In heart and mind, as if for leaf and flower
There were half-hidden limbs and for the riot
Of river water such riot as blood makes
In flesh that touches beauty long desired

And for the song of birds a whispering
From cool lips wet like petals and inspired
With needless music, for the wandering
Of shadow-footed clouds an altering
Of shadows in the brain, a moving on
Of darkness into seasons long, long gone.

SNOW

Last night a brooding cloud
Of undecided mist
Lay on the mountain pasture
And the brooks were loud.

Now running waters lie
Faint as far bells
Under a soft white silence
And the birds ask why.

WINTER FIRE

I

Neither the moon beyond the sill
Nor any flaming of this fire
Touches at all. The night is still.
The last spruce lifts a shadowy spire;
And there are stars. They may be shaking—
Lurching through orbits mad with storm—
But light from them comes faintly breaking
Against the world and is not warm.
Everything seems far away.
Even my heart, so wildly beating,
Seems as remote as yesterday
And all its sea of life retreating
In ripples from a littered beach
Not even waves can any longer reach.

II

Oh, false, false world of shamefaced solitude!
Cold house of shell I carry like a snail!
If I should rise and rush into the wood
Would you rise up and follow me or fail?

There the white body of the moon lies bare,
Bathed by the shining stream of many a star
And if I hasten I shall find her there,
Her silver limbs looped in what winds there are.
What would it be if I were not afraid
To know that her beauty sheathes a bitter blade
Tempered by terror whitened to delight?
Would you dissolve and yield me to the night?

III

Too much afraid of even the star's fire
I have too long sat watching. The flame falls,
And happy heralds of unwise desire
Beat with their hands and heart-beats at my walls.
I hear the tongues of many vivid trees
In mouths of the mysterious dusk go crying
At doors and windows which converge on these,
My body's channels, that should be replying.
How can you hold me dumb, you strange chill thing?
How can your icy roots invade a heart
Taught by wild voyages to climb and sing
Nearest the sun where all heart burnings start?

IV

What matter? Fling aside the doors
And let the snow come rushing in.
Drift it deep upon the floors,

Pile it high where I have been!
I shall rise and strip me bare
And tear the snow-veils from the West.
They are warm enough to wear,
They have wrapped the moon's breast.
They are lovely! They will thaw
Rivers frozen in my veins,
Seas for tidal stars to draw,
Lakes for suns to suck for rains.
I shall wear the snowy mist
And with strength I never had
Leap and lie down, fiercely kissed,
By the stranger and be glad.

OPEN WINDOWS

The grackle in the pavement tree
Creaks news of Northward airs
And human voices come to me
By other ways than stairs.

The curtains stir in winds that touch
Like ministering hands;
The murmurings of Spring are such
One almost understands.

THE WOODMAN

Who is the dark, deep-chested fool
That tends my body's hearthstone
And will not let the red bricks cool?
Who can he be that walks alone
Through forests in my mountain heart
Piling the great logs in his cart?

All through the night I lie and hear him
Felling wonderful tall trees.
His tread is heavy and I fear him,
Yet by the gleam he furnishes
I read the writing on the wall
Traced by his shadow, dark and tall.

LIFE

In crotchey trees the worms weave
A dreadful house of gray
And there they live by no one's leave
To writhe the hours away.

And there they spin their silences
Hour after quiet hour
Unseen, unheard, in happy trees
Busy with fruit and flower.

Until one Summer a tree lacks
Green leaves to look upon
The farmer with his final axe
Finds all its young heart gone.

GROWTH

Long, long ago a host of wonders were
Articulate about me—little birds
In branches bright with bloom, the happy words
Of waters falling, the unceasing stir
Of windy oaks against the ancient sky,
Blue gentians growing in unshadowed places,
Green willows and quiet cows and farm-boys' faces,
Loud wagons on the highway rolling by,—
All these were part of something I have lost
Among new, breathless hours grown heavily
Tumultuous, that will not let me see
Through other windows than these white with frost
Of too much Winter, the impassioned light
Which once gave things I met with their delight.

AFTER THE CIRCUS

I can remember how the memory
Of fat-hipped women and strong chalky horses
And men in red and gold hung heavily
From rafters in my eyes, how other forces
Recruited among peanuts and popped corn
Marched in my middle. I remember now
A miserable sense of having worn
Too small a hat, so that my dizzy brow
Reeled in the settling dust behind the mare
From town to home along the river breezes
Inflamed by blasts of trumpets and the glare
Of white lights hanging among high trapezes.
Yet, for relief, I have still more in mind
How a great bird I never hoped to see
With wings like winds of storm that beat me blind
Flew up and startled both the mare and me.
So great the power of its sudden flight
The very day was altered and my brain
Burst from its bonds and followed the sloped light
On through the maples to the bird again,
And then the look of clowns and the blare of brass
Was gone and something came to the road's edge

And the breath of it blew petals to the grass
And it took me in its arms and sang a pledge
I have not yet forgotten into me.
So much for circuses or for any event.
The coming away is the reality.
The coming to one's self is what is meant.

SEASON'S END

This is the end of the Summer.
This is the end of all.
The sap is running back into earth
And the red leaves shudder and fall.

If I could shake myself down
From the stem that has ceased to flow,
Would there be a cool dark earth to close
Round the things I have come to know?

ROCK FOWLER

I

A weary man with Winter in his eyes
Though it is but September by the skies
Leans on his axe and rests. The afternoon,
Clear blue above but for a visible moon,
Touches the hills with lips and leaning breasts
Such as a man imagines, when he rests,
To approach the burning body of his dream.
Over the West there is a fiery gleam.
The rosy mountain seems to ride a sea
Of valley shadow rippled with mystery.
Among the scant limbs of young tamaracks
A weary man leans on his weathered axe.
A passer-by upon the stony road
Calls from a creaking of malodorous load.
The wind stirs in a skeleton of maple
With fingers full of voices. A loose staple
Falls from a withered fence-post. A horse neighs.
A distant window catches the sun's blaze.
Earth, with its contours and ineffable hues
Seems to burst upward, undeterred by shoes,
And enter into the mind of him who stands

At sullen ease with an axe-helve in his hands;
And what the winds can see behind his eyes
Is doubt, even terror, burning ember-wise—
Doubt of the solemn silence and the wonder
Of this sure earth and the dome it travels under;
As if his thirty years had played him false,
Fed him with fear of things beyond his walls,
Stolen the strong laughter which could kill misgiving
And frozen the heart that fills the brain with living.
Rock Fowler is as free as wild things are
Of all but the fear of reaching for a star,
But there come moments to men so made free
When man seems an impossible thing to be;
When in a moment's rest from opiate work
Gray spiders crawl from places where they lurk
Across unsettled leaves, as fatefully
As ever dramatist sent mystery
To shadow settled things with shapes of meaning
And set the tower certainty to leaning.
So to a man half busy with green posts
A minute's rest is a minute full of ghosts—
Of fox-fires in the spirit's twilight bogs—
Ghosts that rise up within him from the logs
He has left lying in the path of peace
And from old roots whose bleeding will not cease.
Safe from the penetrating eyes of men
The trees seem subtle spies. What then? What then?
What is a man to do and where to go?
What trees may learn soon even dust will know.

There was this morning when an old tramp strode
Drunk as a goatfoot satyr down the road
Wearing a feather in his ruined hat.
Now when he rests Rock Fowler thinks of that.
He lifts his axe and swings so bitterly
That dead twigs shower from the doomed young tree.
And yet the great tap-root of torturing doubt
Still clutches earth and sucks much power out.
Rock drops his axe again and wipes his brow
And wonders what the tramp is doing now
And why the comic spectacle, being gone,
Still fills his mind like something to be done
Which frightened voices warn him of and cry,
"Life is a hurt. Avoid its avid eye!"
The pine trees shiver with a sudden sigh
And rosy clouds range up the Eastern sky.
The ground leaves rustle and a sweet shrill bird
Blows silver and far off and faintly heard
A grouse booms and small squirrels crash through seas
Of drifted leaf at ebb tide among trees.
Rock takes his axe and wanders toward his shack
Half fearing lest the tramp be coming back
To storm the citadel of his reserve
By being something he should have to serve.
He hurries clumsily along the road
As if he were a horse which terror strode
And gripped and guided with relentless knees
Toward what it is that no man ever sees.
No print but pressure of the footless wind

Flattens the grasses at his door. Behind
The blistered panes no things but shadows loom.
Nothing but silence paces the muffled room.
Rock enters and starts echoes from the floor.
He flings his axe in the corner by the door
And lights the stove and stretches out his hands.
A shaft of vanishing sun strikes where he stands
Through the blue stove-smoke. He averts his eyes,
Afraid of what that sunlight might surprise.

II

A leaf moves in the wind from shade to shade
And timid trees withdrawn into themselves
Whisper and worry. Winter has thrust a blade
Through creviced branches and their nested shelves
Trying the way to go. The watchful rabbit
Is changing coats with something hopefully,
As if the fox could never change his habit
Of looking for what rabbits used to be.
A short rod from the upper pasture, black
As water gathered in unfathomed pools,
There is a clump of spruce whose limbs drop back
And touch the mold so that the breath which cools
Their shadows buries their fingers with a drift
Of leaves and needles and the ground-vines weave
Above and under them and light ferns lift
Faces they cover with a sweep of sleeve.
Safe in this dark the gathered grouse sit sleeping

Sure that for birds there is nothing else to do,
That hostile beasts with limits to their leaping
Such as could lose them grapes must lose grouse too.
A leaf moves and there comes a sudden scrape
Of strong wings moving against flaky bark,
Then silence. Then the tree-tops take on shape
And visibly move across the upper dark
To the measures of the wind. There comes a chatter
Of squirrels shaking in their strange red rage
Aware of something ominous in the patter
Of needles upon leaves grown shrill with age.
Now it is lighter out beyond the trees
Than the cock grouse who stands on a spruce root
As motionless as stone. A rabbit sees
The shadowed shape and halts with lifted foot.
Then something on the wind or in the light
Infusion of the dawn dissolves their fear.
The rabbit drops and hurries out of sight
And the grouse, sure no danger can be near,
Lifts a slow foot and struts with neck and breast
In search of sunlight or a fall of seeds
Under a beech tree somewhere, or in quest
Of safe dark limbs for future roosting needs.
Suddenly from his peace among the ferns
The bird starts up and away with a burst of wings.
Is it the changing East which suddenly burns
With naked sun that makes him think of things?
Or is it something in that mossy hollow
Still dark with shadow, too like the ghostly dread

Birds have of power which their wings must follow
Eventually to the level of the dead?
Something in black and gray like a fallen tree
Yet nothing like a tree because of a hand
Full stiffly of dried moss which used to be
Part of a green where lichen trumpets stand
Delicately now at the foot of a sloped beam
Of morning sun on the billowed floor. . . . Is this
The source of that which forces winds to seem
Awful and anguished? And if not what is?
How shall the forest know, when suddenly
The moment passes and the stately bird
With grave feet and high-throated dignity
Returns to the diligence his fear deferred?
How shall the forest tell, the forest which only
Speaks through its moving boughs and cracking twigs
Its usual throats of creatures fierce and lonely
Its noise of crisp leaves dancing gusty jigs?
Or if it does, how shall the great grouse know
Who mounts a log and spreads his splendid tail
And the ruffle at his throat, meaning to show
Through beauty the worthy wonder of the male?
He faces to the East and then to the West
As if there were some pattern in his brain
Of certain gestures, lifts his vivid breast
As once he did in April in the rain
For inattentive hens who turned their backs.
At a pose his prancing stops, his plumage settles.
He is quiet a moment while some far branch cracks

And a late aster bends its pallid petals.
Nothing approaches. Up go pointed wings
To touch their tips above his delicate crown.
A strong stroke downward and the aster swings
More widely, and then up and again down
Faster and faster thumping the slow air
Till the forest booms and rasps with scraping bark
And leaves which lay in a tense stillness there
Leap up and scatter in many a windy arc.
It seems almost as if the tree-tops drew
More vivid circles across the upper sky
Because of what these frantic wing-tips do
To shake the trunks which twigs are anchored by.
Even when the boom of the last beat is done
And the bird struts again and silence floods
Mixed with the merry yellow of fresh sun
Back through the meshy branches of these woods
An echo of that strange strong drumming beats
Somewhere among the winds to measure time
Until new rise and fall of wings repeats
Its meaning and the cadence of its rhyme.
So while the shadow of the forest falls
Continually nearer to its piers,
The great cock at unmeasured intervals
Utters his mystery and far-off ears
Keep hearing dimly and half wondering
Perhaps in terror, and sharp breezes blowing
Keep weaving the sound into the songs they sing
With the call of crows and the sound of water flowing.

If there is any hen that hears him now
She does not come nor even know his meaning.
From where she perches on her sweep of bough
She has an eye for nothing but the gleaming
Of pine seeds shaken by squirrels from their cones
And beech-nuts bursting from three-cornered burrs.
Perhaps she wonders why he shakes his bones
With passion which blows no sign of spark in hers.
No matter. He keeps rolling at his drum
Till suddenly, to silence listening,
Sounds other than of grouse or squirrel come
Other than even the creak of a crow's wing. . . .
Strange sounds of moving, not as creatures stir
Over soft moss and needles or under a limb,
But entering the world of feather and fur
Like sense of death grown audible and grim.
The stately bird folds his gray wings and leaps
Swiftly down to the ground and is lost in the tangle
Of twig and fern and a flight of others sweeps
Up and away at many a sudden angle
To safer windfalls where uneasily
They sit and watch with wide-eyed earnestness
Far shadows where the fearful thing may be
Half wishing they might dare to fear it less.
Nearer it comes. A strange enormous tread
Snapping green boughs that lie across its path
And shattering stiffened branches of the dead
In sullen strides of imminence and wrath.
Nearer and nearer. . . . Past the gullied hollow

Where cold, clear water drips like melted moons.
Nearer . . . And a loud tide seems to follow . . .
Nearer . . . And overhead strange music croons.
Then at the other side of an old clearing
The great thing towers and the sloped sun glistens
On something in its arms. A rabbit fearing
Mad heart-beats more than this stands up and listens.
Up goes the gleam and then a peal of thunder
Bursts into smoke and bold broad wings that drummed
Music from winds and made the whole world wonder
Flap faintly till their last hope has succumbed
And they no longer stir light leaves to leap
Nor shoot the body's arrow from their bow.
They fall unfolded into depths of sleep
Colder and vaster than warm lives ever know.

III

Rock Fowler, with his teeth set like a vise,
Watches the dead bird with ferocious eyes.
A wing-tip shudders. He lifts up his gun
And blasts the quivering thing. The echoes run
Once more among dark ledges of the trees
Engulfing silence in a tide of breeze.
Man with his shot has won the forest world.
Nothing survives the heavy danger hurled
From shouldered steel, not even the strong-winged grouse
King of this region of sun-mottled boughs.
Dun feathers scatter. The king stirs no longer.

Man and bird have met and man is stronger.
Rock leaps a log and reaches for his prey,
Then stops, goes white, and snatches his hand away.
He gropes for foothold on a brink of fear
Which makes him struggle back yet holds him near
Where the dead grouse in stiffening repose
Points with the clutching fist of his strong toes
At other death dissolving in forest mold
With help of those swift ants who have and hold
The outer crust of earth and are the link
Between dark depths to which their tunnels sink
And heavens full of birds that swoop and feed
On many a march of their black antlered breed.
Rock drops his gun and pendulous terror swings
This way and that across his mind like wings,
And the blood rushing back into his brain
Kindles his eyes and lights the thing again.
He steps a little nearer as if afraid
Of what his tread set echoing down the glade.
He looks into the eyes in which the stir
Of spruce-crowns across sky is but a blur
Of thickening motion and knows who it is
Whose body lies there at the foot of his.
And he remembers what the body said
But yesterday, and how last night in bed
The memory lay beside him like a snake
Invisible and large and kept awake
To choke his skull with coils of chilly black
And writhe its moist tail up and down his back.

Now that great serpent is at large once more
Here, amidst tranquil root and squirrel-store.
Rock bends to see, to touch if he should dare,
The fearful human thing stretched lifeless there.
All the high spirit of the million years
Of man's ascension through the flesh he wears
To what he is among the untutored beasts—
The crowned mind busied with more things than feasts,
The red heart rich with many a happy beat,
The shrewd swift fingers and adventurous feet—
All these have gone to make this broken one
Who shudders beside another in the sun.
He sees, as no small brain of any bird
Or any crawling beast man ever heard
Whistling or howling ever yet could see,
Not only a dead man but things to be—
Strange shadows of this death projected on
Through days no animal is sure will dawn. . . .
Shadows across Rock Fowler's frantic wandering
From house to hill, strange echoes in his pondering
Of simple meanings, things a man must meet
And have a solvent for or taste defeat
And go forever outlawed from all ease,
Frightened by mice and terrified by trees.
He sees these things which beasts could never see
And so is not a beast, for beasts are free
Of all that crashing in the wake of mind
Which comes to shatter the small peace men find.
So a man stands beside another dead

And out of tumult in a troubled head
Distils a fiery fear and out of fear
A bulk of black bewilderment drawn near.
It shakes him as an axe-blow shakes a tree
And as the chips fall, so fall heavily
Hewn fragments of the bole a man's blind cells
By slow accretion build, through which there wells
Upward, like sap sublimed from subtle earth,
Into the mind what makes and mars its worth.
But far unlike a tree Rock Fowler falls
And like no shriek of branches are the calls
He tries to utter with lips full of leaves.
The earth gives and the patient earth receives.
The man who feared is without fear again
And valid now. A fox comes from his den
And sniffs the sullied air and lifts his throat
To rattle warning. Two great hawks that float
Too high for shadow utter their shrill cries
And look through dwarf trees where a dead grouse lies
Beside a leafy heap, where black ants pour
From root to root across the piney floor
Busy transferring to devoted dust
By foot and fang, inspired with frantic lust,
The wanderer elements returning blind
From high adventure in the living mind
Where they made men who could not learn to live.
Open, you Earth, and take what men can give!

AFTER TWENTY YEARS

1898-1918

The little hill this side the sun
Is piteously gray.
Its crevices no longer know
The feet of yesterday.

Loud mimicry of desperate war
With friends who stood for Spain
Is gone from these unaltered rocks
And will not come again.

Those gray victorious bows are gone
Which once we saw return
Midst whistles and resounding guns
From seas where noondays burn.

The little boys whose laughter leaped
To see them pass the piers,
Are lost to love for ships of war
Deep under twenty years.

Yet they have put their hearts away
And risen from the hours,
And some there are who ride the skies
And some who sleep with flowers.

And some remain, whose hearts are mute
On lips that may not sing,
Who wonder at the death of friends,
At battles and at Spring.

MEMORIAL

Oh, Countrymen! What tears do we require
Who in the sight of uncreated suns,
Leaping brief lengths of lives from dust to dust,
Pause here to grieve that sap no longer runs
The tall stalks of young bodies one time thrust
Up through the flesh of women wanting sons?
How shall we save from earth's engulfing crust
The earthen body emptied of its fire?

If we must weep may ours be bitter tears
Called from the springs of body-bounded wells
To celebrate in sadness the rich dread
Of being wide-eyed children lost in the dells
Of forests tall as stars. Then let the dead
With ropes of wind ring warnings from harebells
For us, the wandering unshepherded,
Left to the wolfish mercy of our years.

AUTUMN 1918

Lately the apples of a burdened bough
Were gathered from their place of withered grass,
Lately the stubble where the crows are now
Uplifted stalks in many a tasselled mass,
Lately the winds blew softly by coiled vines
Where now a white frost rims the harrow-lines.

Autumn again, and with a graver gray
Among the shuddering branches of still trees .
Eyes cannot see the leaves fall and be gay,
Thinking of fields more desolate than these;
Thinking of voices quieter than things dead
For the brief time that snow lies overhead.

FEBRUARY TWENTY-SECOND

Suppose one never heard of Valley Forge,
And Washington were nothing but a name
Cut in the rock of some Virginian gorge
Where never anything but swallows came.

Suppose December on the Delaware
Had never known that bleeding, swift retreat.
To-day would be a day as others are
With less of colored bunting in the street.

And nothing would be absent from these trees
Which wait their changing, and the starling's song
Would be as happy and as harsh as these
Shrill notes the gray wind blows along.

And the careless music of fast-melting snows
Would ripple in the gutters and be gone,
And crocuses would follow, and the rose
Return, and the world go on.

TO THE DEAD

NEW YEAR'S EVE

We have not kept the faith, and will you know?
Under the cold calm of unhappy snow
Troubled by feet that still have ways to go?
We have not matched your enterprise
We have not dared to put earth from our eyes.
Forgive us, you who have the earth for skies.
The new year leaps from the black bones of the old
Into a gala night of manifold
Whistles and bells and gay hearts warm in the cold.
We have the torn world to let fall or lift,
We, who steal hot-eyed glances at the shift
Of passionate shoulders and the burning drift
Of flesh-fires among fellow celebrants.
Forgive us you whose flesh is done with wants.
We are too much our own inhabitants.

SENSES

Men and women speak their words for Heaven,
I see them holding out their tambourines.
Senses are only five—If they were seven
I wonder if we should know what Heaven means.

I have a mind to ask, why follow them?
I have a mind to ask what news they have
Of flowers vanished from the shaken stem,
What news of God this side of the grave?

I have them all, touch, sight, speech, smell and hearing
And yet I cannot tell what thing is here
Beneath this weight of flesh which I am wearing,
Nor what the heaven is which it draws near.

FLESH

I am the maker of the shadow
With me the waters of the pond are dark
Waters of jonquil and willow
Waters of drifting cloud.

It is I who take the light
It is I who crush the flower
And I am the thing men see
Who search for the thing I hide.

MIDNIGHT: BATTERY PARK

Neither a late moon nor the evening star
Lights the dark moving of the waters here;
Out of the silence the shrill turn of a car
And the lapping of waves under the pier.

The light of the street lamp cares not for the towers
Whose darkened windows rise into the dark,
Only for the late paths and the border flowers
Stirred by the harbor winds in the shadowy Park.

I have sought silences that are not my own
And I have almost found them here in the night
Where I may close my eyes and dare be alone
With what a man knows of music and of light.

OCTOBER

Alexander Wilson, died Sept. 1919

How can I hold my purposes when the trees
Let fall their verdure and unbeautifully
Pierce the October gravity of sky?
I feel an inward loss, looking at these.
And a friend of mine is dead whose ways I thought
Were something like the many leaves that make
Marvels of life from sun and rain they take—
Dead! And I shall not know him as I ought!
How can I hold my purposes when men die
Like scattering skeletons of withered green
In windy corners of the earth and lie
Too early quiet for far too long? I have seen
Truth in the trees and in the faces of men
But sometimes I think I shall never see it again.

WALT WHITMAN

1819–1919

His shining presence falls,
Come noon or midnight,
On meadows, in hallways.
Build no memorials,
There shall be sunlight
And life-blood always.

What his breath held is blown
From breasts of singers
And songless creatures.
Carve no didactic stone.
The cutter's fingers
Are his true features.

TO A SKYLARK

OR ANY OTHER BIRD

At dawn from flower-fondled sleep you rise
By spirals, so they say, and in the skies
Exult and ride and from your throat let go
Sweet singing falls of ravishment which blow
Among earth's thunders and enwrapping airs
And pierce the little flesh which a man wears.
Ah, comfortable bird! If this is so
Study the sounds and syllables which flow
From all men's lips and, when you rise again
To-morrow or next year, sing back at men
In their own language. Say there is no merit
In using wings one cannot but inherit,
And ask what members man can use as well
And why he thinks that heaven and not hell
Is reached by envied flight, and why he sighs
At you on hungry business in the skies
And not at his own kind at his own door
Likewise employed and likewise hunted for
And likewise troubled much by storm and change.
Say that for man to envy birds is strange!
Rise up and sing and say things wiser still
But oh! fly high, for man is out to kill.

THE DISSEMBLING LOOK

Is it so precious,
Is it so dear
That you must hide it
When I come near?

You know that I know
That under your furs
There's a warm body,
A bloom that stirs.

Why give me marble
When I want blood?
Why give me parched sand
When you've a flood?

May be you love to feel,
When I have passed,
Life blushing back again,
Safety at last.

ADVICE

When you go down town
Turn and go back.
Only ahead of you
Is the sky black.

When you are back again
Turn and go down.
There is a darkness
At both ends of town.

When at the noon hour
You hurry somewhere
Take someone with you
Or the dark will be there.

When you are safe in bed,
Clock striking two,
Think, is there anything
Darker than you?

Then when you wake
Look for light in the Park
Or else keep so busy
You don't mind the dark.

DIFFERENT STREETS

There was a little boy
Solemn as stone,
Who walked through my street
Always alone.
Once I came home
By a different way
At a different hour
Of a different day.
There was the little boy
Jubilant then,
Building wet snow
Into marvelous men.
Life is not always
Just what it seems.
Little old boys
Have happy young dreams.

TO THE URBANE

Who cannot drink the wild winds
Must set dry lips to little pools.
Who cannot feed upon sun-fire
Must wait until the sun cools.

So raise your towering city walls
You miserable all!
Build strong roofs above your heads
To catch the stars that fall.

Stop your ears against the wind
Ward the great light from your eyes
Clothe the naked earth with cobbles
Tell old horses you are wise!

EARLY FLOWERS

Mayflowers once and violets now
On sunny corners of the town;
April warmth upon a brow
Where the Winter winds have blown.

Tulip now, and daffodil
By the window in a bowl.
April! Spare one breath to fill
A Winter-shaken soul.

ILLUSION

Silver earth in a grove of slanting stars
Blooming and waving in heaven.
Moonlight over lonely wavering water,
Marriage of silver and pearl.
Have I lost life that this is beautiful
Beyond the memory of all living things . . .
The sullyng squalor of breathing men and women,
The clamor of their ineffectual ways,
Life and the need of living, hunger and death?
Black against a dark sky lightened
The writhe of bending pines in the hands of the night.
The moon has sent chimæras to their caves.
Look! What is it that walks the singing Sound?
Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beats my heart
So high that I have forgotten the bitterness
Of searching a long street for it in vain
At noon of a rainy day.

THE END OF MARCH

This is a sea of Southern sun
That in the fingers of the wind
Sweeps over us. The storms are done.
The Winter drifts are black and thinned.
Even the streets start violets,
Even the harried heart forgets
What Winter was, what living is.

Now, like the seedlings of last year,
Green little shoots of mortal souls
Reach for the soil. The sun shines clear.
Hyacinth roots grope down in bowls
As men grope at the days which pass.
The white roots thicken in their glass.
They have their limits, man has his.

PARADOX

Roots of the green tree sucking at the dry
Earth's crust are safe, wings wavering in wind
Are sure, for who has ever seen them die.

Though there be pith-gorged beetles in the bole
Though there be hunters crouching in a blind,
Leaf and wing serve tree-sense and bird soul.

Who then are these and am I one of them
Of whom men say, "When person pride is dead
You may be granted the adorning gem;

"When love is stilled you shall have the loveliest,
"Pull up your roots and you shall then be fed,
"Care nothing and ask nothing and die blessed."

THE AMPLE CLOAK

I am forever treading on and tearing
The warmest garment which I wear, a thing
As like the shape men keep inheriting
As fruit is like a tree when it is bearing.
Most of the alleys which I walk these days
Are narrower than my flesh and this together,
And mostly, when I venture out, the weather
Arranges torment for it a hundred ways.
Perhaps I may not keep it about me always
Although I am nothing but what it makes of me;
Perhaps I should leave it hanging in one of those hall-
ways
Frequented by whomever I need not be.
Perhaps there is a crack there or a hook
To catch and keep a piece. I shall go and look.

QUATORZAINÉ

By the early light of our precarious lives
The rugged world seems colder than it is.
What do we see? This certainty and this,
Truths made of untruths which the truth forgives,
Figures of clay, imaginary shapes,
As real as stars, as shadowy as smoke,
Fears which unfounded knowledges evoke,
Joys and delights, we foxes and they grapes.
We foxes—hungry as in Æsop's fable,
That scamper off to a pretended world
Where no one knows that stones might well be hurled
At hanging fruit, where all are charitable
And flatter clever beasts for calling sour
The clustered vines that climb the ivory tower.

PASSERS-BY

I

Mostly it is eyes that find me
And your eyes are gone.
Shoestrings I have little need of
For these shoes that bear me on.
So I let you fall behind
With other things
To which I am blind.

II

And you, my little friend of the gay dress!
In a swift moment of encountered eyes
I have touched your hand and kissed your wistfulness
And looked with you upon eternities,
And I know that neither the powder on your nose
Nor the amazing things you wear upon your feet
Can alter the gentleness my vision knows,
Seeing you hurry past me down the street.

III

I know you. You are one of those who fear
The certain end of their uncertainties.
Who, never having had possession here,
Still seek it in such transient things as these
Bright windows looking into gaudy places
Where there are wine-lists and long bills of fare
Arranged for girls who wear their shoulders bare
And kindle eyes with passion from their faces.

IV

In the concert hall
You are the musician
I the listener.
Here your fingers touch no bow,
Make no music for me.
We pass one another
In a kind of silence
As if we were dead.

V

I do not marvel so that you can wear
A flower in your tailored buttonhole
As that the flower does not perish there
In the Winter of your soul.

VI

When you have passed and other eyes
Have found me with a new surprise,
I know I shall not call to mind
The colored hat you wore, the kind
Of dress nor anything so sure.
Only your laughter will endure
And come to me on other trips
Down other streets from other lips.

LONGSHOREMAN

Longshoreman by a sea of sun,
Much wearied by too many bales,
A man moves. What of stone-chilled gales?
And what of old tasks never done?

Too low the rafters of the pier,
Too high the piles of casks and cases,
Too little light in fellow faces,
Too loud the noise of living here.

Are there warmer winds than these
That stir dark storms of stinging dust?
Are there waters of earth's crust
That reach sun-drenched Hesperides?

Longshoreman with a life for hire,
Bewildered by these days of his,
A man moves, and his moving is
A dark wind scattering smothered fire.

SOLILOQUY

The winged seeds of early flowers go
Dancing on the wings of the ground wind,
Cutting their passage with unstable haste
In frantic spirals through this slow, sad brain.
I who have watched the passages of men
Watch these and time the watching to a twist
Of idle fingers among idle grasses
Making a motion as little understood.
The high and certain drift of afternoon
Toward an evening that comes creeping up the hills
Is busy altering the universe,
Busy with clouds whose lovely shapes must die.
I sit upon this stone almost securely
And, seeing the seeds blow down and fall to earth
In the relaxing hold of the faint air
And the crowned trees rise up and stand unstirred
And the mountains draw their shadows about their
shoulders
And the birds stop to sing on branches near me,
Feel conquered somehow by a sense of joy
That takes me at the heart and at the eyes.
Ah! Why so beautiful? Is man a jewel

That he is set with sapphires of delight
And rubies of impassioned vividness
In the rich metal of earth's atmosphere?
A jewel? The wounds of forests on the hills
Cry out against him and the wildflowers break
Never to rise from deep man-trodden hollows,
And the birds, such of them as still have life,
Go crying weirdly, sadly, overhead.
Then why so beautiful, great Mansion Earth,
For man, mad-minded enemy of all?
Is it that to his devastating eyes
The bright pain of your beauty, summoning tears,
Summons a gifted vision not too dull
To see the heart of his eternal strangeness,
The animate power of that tidal sea
Which washes over him and is the world?

SURRENDER

Is nothing changed? Nothing in all the town?
Is this the same street where my shadow swam?
Are these same clothes still saying what I am?
Is this the same sun settling thinly down?

Is the same door still subject to this key,
The carpet to these heels, the chairs still shoddy,
The bed still printed by my weary body,
The ceiling still the same height over me?

All, all the same. Hence my bewilderment.
Listen. When I went out just after nine
The world was dark, and all the dark was mine.
Beauty was dead, all beauty's savings spent.

Then all the world seemed muffled with deep ashes
And every step seemed walking up a flow
Of lava poured across all ways to go
And heaven seemed a mountain crowned with flashes.

That is exactly as things seemed just after
The door closed on my going. By what magic,
If things were so, is life no longer tragic?
Why are my veins blown through by winds of laughter?

Has a man no way to defend himself
When the peace which comes with dignified despair
Seems ruffled and attacked from everywhere
Like a high hat snow-balled by some Christmas elf?

Not I. Let sun drive dusk from doors and hallways.
Let the brain leap. Swear dancing is its calling.
I yield. But leave me a little time for falling
Down on my knees to pray that it be for always.

SHIRKING

I should have gone to the grocer's shop,
Down the alley and turn to the right,
To buy a lady some corn to pop
Over the coals to-night.

But I have been to Symphony Hall,
Up the alley and then in the cars,
And I am not what I was at all—
I know of nothing below the stars.

Marvelous moons are where lights should be,
Down the alley and home again,
Moons which sing as they gleam at me
From between the feet of the rain.

Suppose I had gone to the grocery store,
Dug in my pockets for coins to spend,
What would have come to the glamor I wore
In the end?

BRETONNE

Break in upon the boisterous play of children
Sculling their clumsy boats by the breakwater
And ask them why she stands there looking outward.
All they will say is that she is someone's daughter.
The sunlight falls upon a tide so still
That corded masts against a cloudless heaven
Seem not to move nor creak nor rattle even
And there is no whispering from the pines on the hill.
Yet at the last stone of the crumbling wall
She stands as if the last of storms were blowing
And life were out in it and there were no knowing
Whether any colored sails would blow back at all.
Ask of the chattering women on their knees
Beside the dirty wash-pool why she is waiting
And they will laugh a laugh which speaks of hating
And point to their heads to show you what she sees.
Visions, perhaps, that fill all things with fire
And little ventures with enormous fears
And make a young girl old before her years
With the fierce burden of being what visions require.
Visions, perhaps, yet when the tide returns
Lifting the kelp on the rocks as wind lifts hair,

Someone who sailed will come and seek her there
And find the thing she is but not what burns
Within her as she meets the villagers
With the puzzled blankness of her strange wild face,
Half certain there can be no proper place
In the world of bodies for a trouble like hers.

CIRCE

What slender Circe frightened by his steel
Gave up her magic and with crafty care
Forwarned him of this music on the air
And made him fear what these can make him feel?
Who was she, the mysterious Sorceress,
So jealous of shore sirens and their song
That she could urge him to make surely strong
With hempen twists his human willingness?
Too late he curses her, too late he sees
The terrible sweet joy those sirens tend
With blossomed breasts, moist mouths, a balmy bend
Of sea-foam throats, a flash of vivid knees.
Their white arms madden him, their voices drift
Across the winds with laughter from their eyes.
Lashed to his mast, he burns in heart and thighs.
Ropes bite his flesh, choke veins grown wildly swift.
Strange Circe said, "Beware those asking fire."
Ulysses, lingering with her, drank her words
And changed, not to a beast to swell her herds,
But to a man afraid of man's desire.

THE
CALYPSO

CALYPSO

I

Serenely and like gentle touch of hands
The sunny wind stirs in a sad man's hair.
Lulled by the slip of ripples on far sands
He lies at peace. None of the world is there.
White Helen is a wisp of vanished cloud
Over deep memory; Troy's walls, the many dead
Are gone, half hidden in a grievous shroud
Woven of sea-sounds and winds overhead.
Remembered Ithaca, half fair, half feared,
Beyond a faint horizon rising, falling,
Floats calmly, waiting, and dim things endeared
By aged distance breathe no word of calling.

II

Into the sleeper's dream the living sea
Shaped like a joyful woman whitely warm
Moves with rich silence and rare mystery
With lips to take his broken heart by storm,
With hands that reach up round him to draw down
Into their passionate oblivion

The hurt soul, beaten by winds wrongly blown,
From which all help of heaven has passed on.
Her breath is on his lids, her body swims
Into his aching weariness. Ulysses
Flings up an arm to eyes the sea-mist dims.
Above the wind the white surf booms and hisses.

III

The sleeper wakens and the vision fades
And the world, done with its eclipse, grows clear.
The dream shape seems a sea of suns and shades
And Ithaca, an island hidden in fear,
Comes through a silver pain into his soul
And that immutable Penelope
For whom a man must keep his spirit whole,
Shines with inexorable tranquillity
Down on despair that hangs a humble head
Between her and a shamed swift wish to be
Safe for all time in the oblivious bed
Of Calypso, amorous woman of the sea.

THE WINDMILL

By the sea the winds must blow
For the sea can never know
When a landsman miller dies.
So the winds blow down the skies,
Blow the silver mist from eyes
And the sails of windmills go.
Giant sails at sea are whirled
Round the windmill of the world.

WIDOW'S WEEDS

Black clings about your beautiful unsleeved
Young body as windy rain about the stalk
Of a lithe poplar, slender and small-leaved.
Light as the talk of poplar stems your talk.
Beautiful! Of what are you bereaved
That grief weds with your shadow as you walk?

Why such a splendid lustre in your eyes
As not to any stranger seems like tears
For any part of man that ever dies?
Your ornaments of sorrow yield to the years
Which keep you fresh. Your body's poise belies
The sombre want of color which it wears.

From foot to face, like wind that sets astir
Breasts of bound water, the breath of living runs—
So moves the flame beneath the tigress' fur,
Howling against the night's diminished suns
From lonely thickets for one gone from her,
One whose hot loins are a cold skeleton's.

NEW SINGING

FOR G. A.

I

When the far sun falls to my window-sill
And sparrows in the gutters chirp and chatter
And the earthy winds of morning come to scatter
The night's commandments to be sad and still,
Sweet sense of you comes to me like a fire
Searing and burning vein and vision clear
And you are not a goddess, and I hear
Wild voices singing, singing of desire.

II

Then trooping happiness with many flames
Comes dancing from the fringes of the sky
Attending what my body knows you by.
I rise and fling out arms and call your names.
The winds of morning whistle at the sill
And the world's beating rises from the stones,
But troops with torches kindle in my bones
Wild fires of you. All other things seem still.

III

Beloved, how shall I be glad of you
Who have brought music to my silences
And beauty to my grass, leaves to my trees,
And with your vivid fingers now undo
The beaten darkness of those bat-like wings
Which for so long in my cathedral mind
Stifled what holy passions I could find
For keener light than sun or planet brings.

IV

With what rich gifts of what adoring state
Can I heap up the altar I have built?
Jewels will lose their lustre, flowers wilt,
Songs blow away and promises lose weight.
Should I bring pagan bullocks, garlanded,
To bellow in the porch for sacrifice?
Should I bring incense, burning, metals of price
And a shimmer of colored fabrics to outspread?

V

You are remembrance of some happy face,
Dear memory of once honored mystery
Flashed back to bitter earth to bloom and be
A joy, a living miracle taking place;
And I, a man whom beauty blinds with aching
And the pathos of desire makes desperate,
Find in that joy a new twice-blessed state,
A new life, a young heaven in the making.

PRESENCE

Even though the city of streets and darkened hallways
Sweeps now about me where your wonders were,
And you are no longer here to minister
To hands of mine, and lips, that want you always;
Though there are strangers where we were together
And they are strange because I have lost your eyes,
Though little puddles scattered by feet disguise
Old ways we walked once in a better weather;
Yet this wet wind is breath that quickened you
Before you vanished and left me here alone:
These faces that pass me are memories which renew
What you once were in the dark city of stone;
What you once were! And that is what God is, even,
To hearts like ours that take the World for Heaven.

DANCE

Against the valley which is full of moon
I see you move, feet on the clustered clover
Like rain-drops upon water. The sweet croon
Of serving instruments is faint, the clouds go over
In image of your hair. Your hands are torches
Carried for something that has many altars,
Your lifted eyes are temples in whose porches
The light of humbled planets kneels and falters.
A watching fire which burns like dawn in me
Leaps out and after you as breath to prayer,
Trembles beside you, touches your mystery
And flames triumphant in the dusky air.
Over the earth like light on bodiless breeze
I see you blow, I see your swift feet flash;
My senses shudder and fail and freed of these
And of the body which joy burns to ash
I enter you, sway fall and rise above
The limits of this creature that forgets,
Failing the touch of you, the look of love
And spends love's peace to improvise regrets.
Leap up, you Wonder, to the music of joy,
Move to the measures of the passionate moon,

Dance the proud chorus no man can destroy
For joy is life and limbs will stiffen soon
And I who am too brief to understand
Will soon be blind and wear a heavy hand.
And moon and clover and the magic wind
Will fade and all life's golden blood be thinned
Against the valley which is full of shadow
I see you move. You who are living light
And lovelier life than ever bloomed in the meadow
Leap up with laughter! Shatter the great night!

REACH OUT

Reach out your hands and gather the light which falls
Into the room where you are sure to be;
Touch with your fingers those unshadowed walls
And let their presence fill you happily.
Not that these things are melodies and joys
But that, being near you, they have stored away
Some little of the beauty life employs
To bear you through disproof of things I say.

Lift up your arms to the wind that blows the curtain
And know that I, with forehead to the floor,
Am at your feet, so beautiful and certain,
With reverence and a happy fear and more
In want of just such flashing of sweet fire
As your hands on my shoulders might inspire.

YOU AND I

Were you a tree I know how you would rise
From earth made green with lying at your feet
Against fresh wind and sun made strong and sweet
By touch and gleam of leaves which you made wise.

Were you a bird you would be just the one
To startle silence in some strange wild way
By flight more rosily swift than rising day
And colors never prised in any sun.

Were you a river you would not be calm
But rather with rich laughter flash and stream
Through valleys where no man should come to dream
So much as drink you thirstily from his palm.

Though you are all of these, yet to the tree
I have been only wind; to the winged thing
A watcher only, and to the wandering
Of strong bright water a dreamer who could see
Only an image of his reasoned pride
Wrapped close about the fire it hoped to hide.

EPITHALAMIUM

Across the sky a flight of burning dust.
The air grips at me as I stand
Held to the wild earth's whirling crust
By power that works through foot and lifted hand.
Swiftly the shoulders of the hills lift against the stars,
Swiftly they rise and cross the moon's face.
I hold tightly to the pasture bars
And plant my feet upon this grassy place
And close my eyes to close the sense that mars
My motion through the circle of the sky,
Through wind and fire which I am governed by.
Over my head the night stands like a sea
And the stars rock and dip among the waves.
Like water the flood of life sweeps over me
From wing that stirs and grass that paves.
Even the peaks that pierce heaven with their flying
Shudder with strength and splendor in their places.
Nothing is dead. Nothing is even dying.
Life leaps like fire from all things, all faces.
So in the night I stand, my body bearing
Fiercely and blindly in its inmost vein
The secret power of the last star's staring,

The passion of the moon for fields of grain,
The anguish of all hunger and all pain;
The blessed burden which gives life to life,
The beauty which a man takes shape to hold,
The breath which blows through bodies like a knife,
The seed a man is moisture to unfold.
And all these things, as all the studded skies
Spread moon and star, I pour from out my heart
Because of hands that have torn wide apart
Great stony dykes once raised against surprise
Which kept my soul from navigable waves,
Racing cold corridors as dark as graves.
Oh, radiant Wonder! Oh, touched Being! I turn
Not from this window opening out of me
In fear, but with unlidded eyes that burn
In image of imagined destiny.
I reach in darkness for your holy hands
To touch and so feel something taking form
Here where this mortal measure of me stands,
A joy to blow me wise with splendid storm.
If there is any aim or end to this
Great outward surging of stirred blood and bone
In such a nearness of your spirit there is
More perfect sense than men have ever known
Of where it lies and how a man may go
Forever in its way. This then you are.
How shall I say—be glad—to you who know
More fierce strong things of beauty than any star
Knows of the upper air? How shall I speak

When speech is only a kissing of the hems
Of that toward which the dawns of your eyes break,
Toward which you rise as flowers rise on stems?
Oh, Beautiful! I am no longer young.
Now from the gentle breast of your wise being
I lift my head and open eyes for seeing.
I clamber down from that to which I clung.
I take on stature and with stature grow
Humble that I have fed upon you so.
Across the sky a flight of burning dust.
The air grips at me as I stand
Held to the wild earth's whirling crust
By power that works through foot and lifted hand.
Oh, lift your face and give my lips your mouth!
The wind of Summer sings from the starred South.
Forgive me what I was when winds were West.
Straining the blossomed throbbing of your breast
Against my leaping heart I feel the give
Of wild earth riding onward, fiercely whirled,
I see the vivid sun, I see the world
Beyond men's brains where love may learn to live.

STORM

Over the mountain now
The cold clouds ride like a sea.
Come with your lips and your brow
And your breast and be close to me.

It is black where the mountain stands
And the valley streams are foam.
Come to me now with your hands
And let my heart go home.

There is only one way to meet storm—
With a flame of towering fire
Rising from hearts that are warm
With wise desire.

Take my lips to your brow
And let me look in your eyes,
For over the mountain now
Wild storm winds fling the skies.

NOCTURNE

When you have let the late sun burn you bare
And have given yourself to the wind
Come look for me and I shall rise and tear
The darkness from old spruce-woods still unthinned
And you shall have it to bind round your hair.

When you have lain at night among dark trees
Filling the heaven of your eyes with stars
And your white body with the singing breeze,
Come where I am and I shall bend the bars
Of moonlight to whatever shape you please.

When you have bathed bright breast and shining shoulder
Deep in the darkness of some mountain pool,
Body to body take me and let smolder
The deep fires. Far away old suns grow cool.
Look! Here are embers that will not grow colder!

WORDS

Not all the help men ever have of dreams
Could make of life what life beside you is.
Not all the singing of all vocal streams
Could make of sound what with some strong-mouthed kiss
I stop upon the laughter of your lips.
Not all the motion and fire of stars and suns
Could move the skies as in my finger-tips,
Touching your breast, the life is moved and runs.
Not all the angels of eventual heaven
Could do with darkness what your eyes can do.
So I choose not to die at twenty-seven,—
Perhaps at thirty or at thirty-two.

THE DURHAMS

I

There is Niagara, which is water tumbling
From cliffs which keep it thundering and rumbling,
But that is nothing to the fall of storm
From heights of cold to meadows moist and warm
In Autumn over Windbrook. In November
When a turkey's life is down to its last ember
A little wind with only leaves to drift
Creeps from the West to Southward through a shift
Made to seem very like a lull, and then
Blows up the valley toward the peak again.
Then tides of mist come sweeping from the sea
And climb the ridge and linger dizzily
And plunge like sublimated water down
Gray gulleys which converge upon the town.
Where is Niagara in the face of this?
Diminished and outdone, and all the hiss
Of all its seethe of spray is but a quiet
Beside this fall of storm-cloud and this riot
Of frantic pines and birches bent like bows
Drawn to ward off the onslaught of their foes.

Just such an Autumn storm was in full course
When Abel Durham with his old lame horse
Drove up into his dooryard and descended,
And young Job, through the window, saw what ended
The long, hard time of two men badly keeping
A house whose only woman was one sleeping
Under the sandy pines beyond the road,
A woman freed of her enslaving load.
Here was another woman to keep going
The heavy house of man, and winds were blowing
Wildly and fiercely so she might not say
Ever at any time of night or day
That her coming was unwarned, though Durham smiled
In partial refutation of the wild
And unequivocal welcome of the storm.
The old man brought her in to get her warm
And grinned at Job, who thought them man and wife
And called up the best features of a life
Devoid of women. Durham spoke her names,
Not any of which were Durham. Two small flames
Lent by the lantern to her eyes, saw Job.
He shook her hand and took the carriage robe,
Frightened by what he saw that spoke to him
There in her face, so very far from dim.
He was puzzled by the strangeness of those eyes
Flung backwards over a round shoulder lifted.
He stayed about the kitchen, killing flies,
Watching for stove-lids waiting to be shifted.
And when he went to bed he saw himself

Set in some crazy figure like an elf
Following a woman through place after place,
A woman with strange meaning in her face.
And then he woke and heard a woman move
Down in the kitchen lighting up the stove,
And it was morning and the sun was bright
And life had altered, worm-like, in the night.

II

A mild man with a gentle silver beard
And eyes of a blue no baby ever feared
And large black clothes and little quiet feet
Walked in his room and rubbed his hands for heat
And, feeling his conscience go a little lame,
Wondered what he would say when Durham came.
He stopped beside his table and lit the lamp
Then turned his head to listen to a tramp
Of muddy shoes upon the snow outside.
The sound spread like a ripple and grew wide.
The mild man shook with insecure relief
Borrowed from respite, and turned over a leaf
In a large lamp-lit book upon the table
And stooped to fortify the charitable
Intention of his mission with the word
Of one much read but very seldom heard.
His straight sweet lips moved faintly. His eyes closed.
His hands closed. His head swayed as if he dozed
While the lamplight fell upon his fine, smooth hair

And on his face, and made it seem nowhere
In any plane at all, too frankly near
For any heaven and too faint for here.
His lips moved silently and then he rose
And crept to the curtained window on tip-toes
As if the God he prayed to might discern
His human, uncontrollable concern.
He stood a moment peering into the dark
Following every far-off little spark,
Which might be wagon-lights, until it grew
And clattered loudly past as wagons do.
Once when one heavy bulk without a lamp
Came almost quietly and stood breathing damp
Before his gate, the pastor's heart beat higher
And chokingly and filled his face with fire,
His hands with dampness and his feet with cold
And his mind with unhappy sense of being old.
He saw old Durham sitting starkly still
As if awaiting some decree of will
To move him, saw him drop the reins and rise
And wrap his blanket tighter about his thighs
And then sit back again and speak to his team
And move ahead as if he wouldn't dream
Of stopping there, much less of going in
To be addressed in terms of God and sin.
The pastor wandered back into his chair
And threw his head back and sat panting there.
And then he rose again and paced the floor,
And at the window and the loose-hung door

The wind went shuddering, as if to say
That nothing is to-morrow nor to-day
Just as it seems to men who think their brains
Have seen and follow laws which God ordains
Without consulting life, the citizen
Of winds and places, animals and men.
The grave man lighted still another lamp
And then resumed his lightfoot, troubled, tramp
And thought that he would try the woman next
And so be more inspired and less perplexed
And lose all feeling that the Winter wind
Is nearer than the Lord to a man's mind.

III

A woman at a window watched a man
Load up his sleigh with bags and an oil can
And climb aboard and gee the horses off
And fog the air a little with his cough.
She watched him to the highway, where the team
Broke to a jingling trot. She watched the stream
Hurrying under the bridge, so swift and certain.
And then she shuddered and drew the window curtain
And stood a moment pressing at her cheeks
With anguished fingers which left livid streaks.
She saw the mirror and was reflected there,
And watched as she pulled hair-pins from her hair
Letting it fall a little about one shoulder,
All black, no gray to prove her growing older—

All black and soft, far softer than the face
To which it helped a little to give grace.
The curtain at the window flapped in the draft
And the late Winter sun wedged in a shaft
Of thin-blown gold that reached as far as the wall
And kindled the printed roses, thorns and all.
The woman stood and listened to a stir
Of heavy moving in the room next to her.
The floor-boards creaked a little and the wall
Shivered and made small grains of plaster fall.
The woman listened and stepped nearer the door
Loosening a button in the waist she wore.
She spoke in a voice which had faint shudders in it
Asking for Job to come to her a minute.
And then she sat and stared across the bed
And pressed a hand palm-outward to her head.
She said "Come in" when there was a light knocking
Then moved her noisy chair back and sat rocking.
Job entered timidly, with averted eyes.
His hands were large and thick, his feet of a size.
His voice was knife-edged but it soon was warm
With other lips among the black, soft storm
Of loosened hair. The old walls kept their creaking
And there was other language than lip-speaking,
Youth crying out to youth and fear to fear
That rich, red veins beat far too high to hear—
The strange wild anguish of unblossomed lives
Seeking a safety in what the moment gives
When beauty traces beauty among limbs

No voice of reason warns nor even dims.
The world was on the other side of walls—
The world of sleigh-bells and of crisp foot-falls,
But strange volcanoes of half-planned mischance
Sometimes burst wide and do a fiery dance
In the impassioned spheres beyond earth's law.
Neither the woman nor her lover saw
Durham creep up and listen at the door,
And neither heard the creaking of the floor.
For they lay still and listened to their hearts,
For they were children, and no child's ear starts
At such small things as sounds. So Durham waited
And the thumping in his breast was unabated.
And then he heard them stir and felt like falling
And a great darkness rose and stood there walling
Life and the living from his furtive brain
And all of him seemed breaking under the strain.
Back down the stairs he groped his way and through
The dizzy kitchen, slamming the door to.
And then those happy bodies above stairs
Leaped to their feet aware of life that wears
A cowering defeated look and goes
Stooped and distorted as the least wind blows.

IV

Far up the slope of birch and brooding fir
Where winds in green strings make æolian stir
Of rippled singing, little feet and wings

Carry the lives they tend and thunderings
Of water falling from far rocky walls
Fade among mosses and the sunlight falls
In softer silence. The shrill cry of jays
Shrieks in the clearings and the mole obeys
His wish to hide, and world-old gravities
Are disobeyed by this year's chicadees.
There to the windward of a coppice lies
With lowered head and deep, inquiring eyes
A slim white thing made as if out of breeze
That carries snow, of little sapling trees
Rich with some April, delicate and rare,
Too beautiful to sleep, for unaware
Of things less beautiful that stalk their prey
Beauty is never safe. By night nor day
There is no rest for loveliness, no repose.
Always a deer, with wakeful ears and nose,
Must listen and breathe, more surely when a doe
From throat to haunches is as white as snow.
There by a coppice of dark evergreen
The Windbrook doe lies down, unheard, unseen.
Like a grouse booming goes her restless heart
And her strained flanks keep twitching, ready to start
Up and away at scent or sound of fear,
At sun that alters shadows, winds that veer
And carry safety with them. Always so.
There is no peace but says, "Rise up and go!"
The forest in its dusk is full of snares.
Even the best tuned sense comes unawares

Sometimes upon inevitable end—
A hunter's bullet or a lynx to mend
The broken life and bind it up with death
And suck the crimson fire and stop the breath
That quickened beauty and inspired the wood
With sudden ecstasy. Such is the food
Which gives the busy fittest their survival—
Beauty, of which there may be no revival
Once the wild seed is cleft and the kernel gone.
The white doe shudders and leaps and hurries on.

v

The wind among roof icicles was weird
Although the sap was in the maple roots.
Old Durham, with some ice in heart and beard,
Stood in the doorway brushing off his boots.
He shut the door and slapped it with his cap
And lurched across the kitchen to the tap
Where water trickled over pans and dishes
And shells of eggs and remnants of tinned fishes.
The stove was cold. There was not even sun
To slip in through the panes and kindle it.
With such a fire as shines for everyone
But him who learns that life is a misfit.
Old Durham burned his fingers on a match
And tore his coat-sleeve on the woodshed latch
And stumbled in the kindling. These were spears
Of that world-militant which a man fears

Who fears himself and finds that mad self lodged
In all things neighboring and familiar
In all the shifts by which he ever dodged
The fall of facts, the rise of things that are.
The stove was not unyielding. It grew warm
And Durham rubbed his hands and held them near it
And looked through frost-etched windows at the storm
And heard the wind and wished he couldn't hear it.
He found some rags and stuffed them at the sills
But there are crevices which nothing fills
In men and houses and the storm still shrieked
In lath and brain and both those frail things creaked.
The gaunt man sat awhile and sucked and blew
Breath which had all that any air could do
To feed him what his old thin blood required.
His beard kept thawing and his boots perspired,
And there were demons prodding at his ease
With sharp innumerable miseries.
He searched in corners for more window-cloths
And found some in a closet full of moths
And under them a woman's pair of shoes
Down at the heel and broken at the toes.
He dropped the rags and let the shoes fall, too,
And stood and stared at them as if they told
Some old forgotten thing and were a clue
To dishes and cold stove and the storm's cold.
He looked at them and then he raised his boot
And kicked them as he might have kicked a root
That tripped him on his going to the spring.

He kicked them both and saw them fly and bring
Hard up against the glaze of window-frost.
They crashed and went, but tongues of blizzard crossed
The silver threshold of the shattered panes
And stung the stove with little stings of steam
And Durham stared, as children stare at trains,
And gaped as if it might have been a dream.
He swore at what he thought was hounding him
And stuffed the holes with rags. The room grew dim.
He shifted pots in fury and kept looking
To see if things were done that sat there cooking.
He drank his coffee warm, like milk from a cow,
And ate cold beans and felt the cold wind blow.

VI

The old man stamped about his sugar-camp
Counting the buckets and the spigot pegs,
Wondering how ever any man could tramp
To all those trees with but one pair of legs.
And now and then he stopped and his breath came
Thick, like a horse's, and he had to lean
Against the brick-work of the kettle frame
To come up out of the fog in which he had been.
He had his gun beside him, thinking of bear,
And once he stumbled on it and it fell
And made him dizzy to see it lying there.
If it went off his ears had failed to tell,
For they were thumping, thumping, with a heart

So startled that there seemed no more to start.
He stooped and raised the gun, and straightening,
Saw through the door a stir of something moving
Far up among the maple boles. No wing.
Perhaps a bear, but waiting would be proving.
He stood and watched and seemed to see a blur
Of round converging wheels that came and went.
He wiped his eyes and still there was a stir
Beyond the trees. A branch swung down and bent.
A windfall crashed. A bird far out of reach
Sang in the barren branches of a beech.
The old man watched and neither saw nor heard
Things which were yet half visible in his brain—
A woman, all in white, a little blurred—
A man whose presence irked him and gave pain;
And out beyond these things a naked grove
Of old untimely trees and drifts of snow
And a faint sense of something waiting to move
And a void lull of winds about to blow.
He took a breath again and rubbed his eyes.
There. He saw it now. No bear moves so,
For it was tinged with white, and white implies
Some lighter thing, perhaps the rare white doe.
The old man trembled and swung up his gun.
It shook, but the sights shone clearly in the sun
And then he seemed to lose the sighted thing.
There was a swift spasmodic stiffening
Of finger on the trigger and a roar
And whatever it had been was there no more.

Old Durham staggered out into the snow
Helped by the proud unbending trunks of trees
Up toward the place where there should be a doe
White as the snowflakes of a Winter breeze.
And then the images came back again—
The irksome man came striding into his brain
And the white woman lay upon the ground.
Then something flashed. He fell without a sound.



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